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Whitewashing in Hollywood silently affects our children

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The reaction to the 2016 Oscars, which birthed the trending topic #OscarsSoWhite on Twitter, highlights a serious problem in our country — a lack of representation for non-white communities.

Watching a movie in the 1950s is still somehow reminiscent of today. We have put an end to blackface, the practice of coloring a white person's face with paint to fill the role of a historically non-white character without hiring an accurate representative. Yet major blockbuster films did not commonly hire non-white characters for major roles until just recently. Our movies now typically feature a white cast, with the exception of a few minor roles played by people of color (POC). For the second year in a row, the Oscars failed to recognize the comparatively few roles played by minorities. By doing so, the institution feeds into an endless cycle.

A recent event at UMaine sought to address the issue of whitewashing and stereotypes. Kirsten Daley, a student at UMaine and an adamant social justice activist, moderated "Your Monthly Dose of Nonsense: Whitewashing in Hollywood," a discussion on selective casting and its effects on the audience.

"Privilege is not having to think about it. If you are able to walk, you don't think about the people who cannot access a building because there isn't a ramp..." Daley said, speaking out on the privilege white people have towards ignoring the problems of racist casting and stereotyping in media.

"There is no representation. When people of color critique the lack of inclusivity, they're given characters who are 1-dimensional caricatures of their culture in order to appease critics. This is why we see so much of the "ghetto" black women, "hard working Mexican immigrant," "dragon lady" Asian women. But these characters don't serve enough of a purpose and often end up being very, very small parts. When this is critiqued, we are given larger and often times more offensive roles like the "sexually submissive" Asian women, "thug" black men, "gangbanger" Hispanic men, etc. These images just normalize an image of POC that is entirely unwarranted."

Blockbuster movies too often feature whitewashing. Notoriously so was "Pan" in 2015, "Gods of Egypt" and "Doctor Strange" in 2016 and "Ghost in the Shell" set to release in 2017. "Pan" was an anticipated remake of the Peter Pan tale, but it featured Rooney Mara as Tiger Lily — a beloved character long established as Native American. "Gods of Egypt" was set to be an action packed thriller following the story of Egyptian gods Set and Horus, battling against one another. It fell flat in theatres and gained great criticism for casting white Europeans in the roles of sacred Egyptian deities. "Doctor Strange" cast the white Tilda Swinton in the role of a Tibetan character. Swinton herself said she wasn't selected for an "Asian role." Coming to theaters next year, "Ghost in the Shell" features Scarlett Johansson playing the iconic Japanese character, Motoko Kusanagi.

In many of these cases the directors, producers, or studios of the films say they don't cast by race, but by talent. This does not excuse the erasure of non-white roles in Hollywood and it ignores the very narrow entrance for aspiring, non-white actors who are trying to break into the business. It also feeds a cycle of non-white talent being excluded from big name movies and those same movies selling without non-white characters, therefore finding success without the "need" for these minority roles.

This lack of representation feeds into a lack of role models for non-white children and feeds racial bias for white children as well. The stereotypes seen on television influence a child's self-esteem, leading to damaging thoughts on what roles they can fill in life: thug, ghetto and gangbanger. On top of this, white children only see these roles and begin to stereotype real-life POC without a second thought, especially in mostly white communities like Orono, Maine.

Lack of representation, racism and hatred go hand in hand. It is the job of the audience to demand a change.

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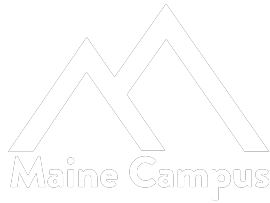
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